OHIO VALLEY CULTURE AS REFLECTED IN THE SHORT FAMILY, 1790-1860

BY

IRVING FREDERICK AHLQUIST

B.S., Wheaton College, 1940
A.M., University of Illinois, 1941

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1947

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Much has been written about the hardy pioneer in American history who braved the dangers of early travel to cross the mountains and to settle in an area where "the wolves howled and the buffaloes congregated . . . and the anxious sentinel walked his lonely round in the darkness of midnight . . . to guard his family and his neighbor from the tomahawk and scalping knife of the ruthless savage." If, however, all the inhabitants had been of this basic type who cleared the way and built the foundations, it would have taken centuries to create an intellectual atmosphere. Among these early settlers were men and women of ideas and aspirations, brave and worthy in their own field of endeavor. As a Daniel Boone shared the dangers of the wilderness and the uncertainty of survival in a hostile environment, so these men with scalpels, books, and test-tubes, incurred a certain amount of risk in a region that was not fully ready for their specialties.

To understand the formation of a cultural pattern in the region under survey, one must see the individual in the group effort as he strives to satisfy his aesthetic and intellectual needs. Of great importance in the Ohio Valley was the presence of a few individuals of education and enlightenment among the majority of simple, untutored folk. The flowering of culture in the early West was relatively feeble, for in a new country self-preservation and bare physical necessities always exercise the primary influence. Until the need for intellectual values could be felt and demanded, the courageous efforts of the pioneer culturists, like the Shorts, could not meet with much reward.

The story of the Short family is not one of mere genealogical data, although a certain amount of that is necessary and useful. Rather the object is to show how the Shorts

reflected, contributed to, and participated in, the broader cultural life of the Ohio Valley. To write about the Shorts is fascinating because of the way in which their lives linked up with the early history of the region in so many ways, yet it is formidable because of the many phases of cultural life in which they were active. Their letters, papers, and diaries reveal the growth of a cultural life in the early nineteenth century which can not be neglected in the reconstruction of cultural patterns in the ante-bellum period.

In this study the intellectual interests of the Shorts are presented under such chapter headings as Seats of Enlightenment; Literate Interests; Easel and Lintel; Scientia Amabalis or botanical pursuits; Cholera, Calomel, and Cathartics; Pillar to Post or their many travels; the Peculiar Institution; and the Glorious Prospect.

The origins of the Short family belong to the early history of Virginia. In the year 1676, on the twentieth of March, the will of William Short, late of England, was probated in Surry County, Virginia. Concerning William Short's life before his arrival in Virginia and even up to his death we can only make conjectures as manuscripts and records are not available. Like thousands of others before him, he had probably come to the new world to seek his fortune. Whether he succeeded in his ventures, acquired vast acres of tobacco lands, and surrounded himself with servants and slaves, can not be determined; nor does the span of the next century yield any information on the succeeding generations other than the progeny which they left in the wake of time. But with the marriage of William Short IV to Elizabeth Skipwith, daughter of Sir William and Elizabeth Skipwith, October 21, 1758, the first roots of the family tree are visible. Sir William, the father of Elizabeth Skipwith Short, was the descendant of Sir Gray Skipwith, a loyal cavalier, who fled from England during the Cromwellian era and settled in Virginia. His property is said to have been inherited by

his grandson, Sir William Skipwith, from whom it went to his son Sir Peyton in 1769. It was the latter who built "Prestwould," in Mecklenburg County, southern Virginia, where William Short and Elizabeth Skipwith were married. Their home was established at "Spring Garden," in Surry County, where William employed his time usefully on the plantation. His practice of soil conservation and fertilization in this part of Virginia evoked praise from Edmund Ruffin, nineteenth century farm reformer, who was the proprietor of the estate one hundred years later.

To Elizabeth and William Short were born three sons and four daughters, three of whom later ventured into the Kentucky country to transplant a Virginia culture on the western frontier. Their first heir was given the name William, a name which had been carried through five successive generations. He was born in Surry County, Virginia, September 30, 1759, attended William and Mary College where he studied law and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa only five months after its founding. In the fall of 1784 he joined Thomas Jefferson in Paris, the beginning of a sad excursion in diplomatic circles. Jefferson thought much of his ability and particularly his "peculiar trait for prying into facts." Becoming Jefferson's private secretary in 1785, Short was eventually promoted to chargé d'affaires in 1789 when Jefferson reluctantly accepted the post of secretary of state in Washington's cabinet. This particular appointment conferred upon William Short a distinctive place in American history; his was the first nomination made by Washington to the Senate of the United States. Though possessing this unique position among diplomatic personalities, Short suffered many disappointments in the foreign service. He had hoped to be minister to France in 1791 after Lafayette had written Washington that Short was "respected and loved in France in a manner singularly useful to the public and honorable to himself"; but as a recompense for losing this coveted post, he was appointed minister resident at the Hague in 1792. At the same time he was also assigned with

William Carmichael to Madrid to negotiate a treaty on the Mississippi and Florida questions. Here again the laurels were taken from him after Manuel de Godoy, Duque de la Alcudia, supreme in the Spanish Council of State, complained about the "lack of splendor and rank" in the American agents. As a result of this complaint, Thomas Pinckney, minister to London, was dispatched to Madrid to complete the transactions and to have his name affixed to a document, the basic elements of which had been the labors of William Short. Returning to the United States, Short settled in Philadelphia, where he lived forty years as a private citizen. Here his chief interests were following the course of his many investments in Ohio, Kentucky, and New York lands, buying bonds in many of the growing cities of the West, and linking his destiny with the sprouting railroads and canals of the Ohio Valley. From the superintendence and financing of the medical education of his nephew, Charles Wilkins Short, a young lad from Kentucky, who studied in Philadelphia from 1813 to 1815, William Short derived his greatest satisfaction. The chief contribution, however, which William Short made to the cultural life of the Ohio Valley was not direct. By his will, after his death in 1849, the greatest portion of his million dollars was given to his favorite nephews, Charles Wilkins Short and John Cleves Short, enabling them to lay the foundations of a more refined social order in this sprawling hinterland.

The first member of the Short family to heed the beckonings of Kentucky was Peyton Short, brother of William Short. Born in Surry County, Virginia, December 17, 1761, Peyton, like his brother, attended William and Mary College and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Upon the death of his father in 1782, having received a generous patrimony, Peyton Short investigated the potentialities of the western country, believing that the eastern part of Virginia was in a state of collapse. Coming to Kentucky in 1785, and living for a time at Danville, where he was one of the first members of the Political Club founded there, Peyton Short returned to

Virginia in 1788 to pack his possessions for permanent removal to the western frontier. Soon thereafter he met and married Maria Symmes, daughter of John Cleves Symmes, founder of Cincinnati. Young Short was early rooted and planted in the Bluegrass; the Virginian was becoming the Kentuckian.

Peyton Short, like all restless pioneers in a new region with its numerous opportunities, could not resist the temptation to participate in many enterprises. When Louisville was made a port of entry in 1789, Peyton was appointed one of the custom collectors. Four months later the importunate James Wilkinson persuaded Peyton to enter into a partnership in the purchase of cheap tobacco in Kentucky and Ohio, to be shipped to New Orleans and sold. This venture not only completed the bankruptcy of Wilkinson, but completely prostrated Peyton, who never fully recovered. Other business transactions also attracted his attention. The *Kentucky Gazette,* January 23, 1790, carried an advertisement of Peyton Short and Company opening "a large and general assortment of fresh Goods in this place [Lexington] . . . which they will sell on the lowest terms for Cash." Peyton shortly deserted the mercantile trade to follow the more lucrative business of speculating in land, of operating several distilleries, and of serving his county, Fayette, as a member of the state senate from 1792-1796. In the years which followed, until his death, September 1, 1825, Peyton's affairs grew in complexity. The mania for land speculation in a new and growing country had seized him by its allurement and eventually defeated him by its seducement. His contributions to the cultural life of the Ohio Valley, though many in his early days through affiliation with the Danville Political Club and as a member of the board of trustees of Transylvania Seminary, came largely through his progeny whom he carefully trained in the elements of a gentleman's education.

Through the activities of Peyton's two sons, Charles Wilkins Short (1794-1863) and John Cleves Short (1792-

1864), one can trace a cultural growth in the Ohio Valley which was closely related to national trends in education, science, literature, art, and religion. The Shorts were people of refinement and mental training who were not willing to subordinate their intellectual qualities to the exigencies of a new frontier region. They clung to the books which they could accumulate, supported the rising educational institutions, contributed to the literary and scientific journals of the West, and aided in the scientific advancement of the region. But these institutions, significant as they are as concrete examples of cultural achievement, are more impressive when studied with a knowledge of the lives of the men who labored to see them born. In the efforts of the Shorts one sees the growth of a cultural independence of the West, a civilization shaped by ambitious people.

In the course of westward expansion, educational institutions were adapted to the peculiar needs of the frontier. Western colleges were modeled largely after eastern schools, almost a symbol of the dependence of the West upon the East for cultural life; yet they were outposts of an advancing people and reflected their ideals. Kentucky was still a backwoods area when Transylvania Seminary was founded in 1780. Among its trustees, in the first decade of its existence, was Peyton Short. In 1804, he sent his two sons to Transylvania University, as it had become known in 1799, but transferred them shortly to Joshua Fry's private school at Danville, Kentucky. From 1807-1811, Charles Wilkins Short was again a student at Transylvania, receiving instruction in Latin, Greek, mathematics, geography, logic, rhetoric, natural philosophy, and astronomy.

With the year 1825, Dr. Charles Wilkins Short joined the medical faculty of Transylvania University, having earned his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1815, and practiced medicine for ten years at Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Later, in 1839, associating himself with the Louisville Medical Institute, Dr. Short remained there as a

professor of materia medica and medical botany until 1849, when he handed in his resignation, hoping to be freed, as he said, "from a yoke which has galled me for twenty-four years." With his retirement, a chapter closes in his useful life as a pioneer educator in the western country, where it was not the buildings or the course of studies which gave the Ohio Valley its honorable distinction in science and letters, but the reputation of the men who guided the destinies of young students and cultivated the mental soil with true science.

While the residents of the Ohio Valley were establishing and erecting college halls, they did not neglect their literary interests, whether in reading the classics or the novels of Sir Walter Scott. They also employed the quill in developing a literature which "exhibits traces of a distinctive character that give it fresh and wholesome individuality." The writers were partial in their backwoods area and "wrote with provincial zeal."

Charles Wilkins Short, after completing his medical education in Philadelphia, packed his trunk, for the return journey to Kentucky, with *Roderick Random,* Pope's *Homer,* Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Chesterfield's *Letters,* Byron's poems, and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* as well as medical and botanical works. These books which were bought by the Shorts serve as a clue to their intellectual interests; moreover, their choice is representative of the taste and literary needs of a typical family in the western country whose own books were an essential medium in the dissemination of cultural ideals. Here, far removed from eastern centers of culture, the Shorts built and enlarged their libraries. Scarce though books were in the early period when Peyton Short came to Kentucky, his library at "Greenfield," and later Charles Wilkins Short's at "Hayfield," and John Cleves Short's at "Shorthill," were important in the perpetuation of culture and the establishment of social and intellectual connections with the old world and the eastern seaboard.

Whatever may be written of the reading interests in the region and the books which were imported by the residents, their several attempts to maintain a "voice in the wilderness" by writing original productions, proclaim the dawning of intellectual maturity in this region. William Gibbs Hunt's *Western Review and Miscellaneous Magazine* sensed the throbbing intellectual pulse on the middle western frontier. Its purpose was to elevate the moral tone of the region, portray its physical characteristics, and provide a means to exhibit native talent. Dr. Short subscribed to this periodical and contributed two of his original poems to its contents: "Enigma" and the "Apology," both in 1829. They had not been his first published poems, however, for in 1814, he wrote "To Mary with a Sprig of Winter Green," which was published in the Philadelphia *Portfolio.*

Not only did the literary journal make progress in this period, but also scientific magazines as the *Transylvania Journal of Medicine and the Associate Sciences,* of which Dr. Charles Wilkins Short was co-editor from 1829-1831, and to which he contributed most of his writings. The "numerous intelligent Physicians and Surgeons, who are scattered over the States of the Mississippi Valley . . . who have original matter to communicate, should consent to publish it in the interior, where they live and to which it relates, instead of sending it to the periodical presses of the seaboard," wrote the editor. Eastern patronage was not courted; the policy was to rely exclusively on western materials, western matter, and western readers, independent of transmontane assistance.

Charles Wilkins Short was not the only literary member of the family. His brother, John Cleves Short, though contributing little to the printed page, wrote poems on occasion, one being a sonnet, addressed to John S. Skinner, editor of the *American Farmer,* and published under the name "Sylvanus," in *The Transylvanian or Lexington Literary Journal.* To John Cleves Short, however, printer's ink had little attraction; he proved his literary ability in the thousands

of letters which he wrote, wherein he waxed poetic.

In addition to their educational and literary interests, the Shorts also encouraged the artistic impulse, both creatively and appreciatively. Dr. Short painted on many occasions, while Judge John Cleves Short followed his impasioned love for building by combining several different styles of architecture in the renovation of his home, "Shorthill," thirteen miles from Cincinnati. Peyton Short sat for Matthew Harris Jouett, famous Kentucky portrait painter, while Dr. Short had his likeness depicted in oil by James Henry Beard whom Harriet Martineau described as the "Flamingo of the New World." Portrait painters, however, were not the only class of artists whom the Shorts patronized. Dr. Short purchased, in 1852, one of the Niagara Falls paintings of Gottfried Nickolaus Frankenstein, but he was "not satisfied with it" and its price of three hundred dollars for which he "had expected to have gotten one of the best productions" of Frankenstein's brush.

The virgin timber lands, deep river gorges, unsurveyed hills, and unexplored forests of the Ohio Valley offered unusual opportunities to a naturalist like Dr. Charles Wilkins Short. The extent of the influence which he had upon the development of scientific knowledge in the West, particularly in the field of botany, can be measured by the reputation which he sustained in botanical circles at home and abroad. He was an able and indefatigable laborer and one of the few botanists of the western prairies. Not only did he classify and name new specimens, but he created an interest in the "amiable science" among his own associates and made known to the world, through his harvesting and distributing western plants to correspondents on the eastern seaboard and in Europe, the treasures of nature to be found in the American backwoods.

Among the Shorts there is another type of pioneer: the crusader who came with the lancet and scalpel. Charles

Wilkins Short early started the study of medicine under his uncle, Dr. Frederick Ridgely, continuing that interest by his matriculation in the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania in 1813, receiving his degree in 1815. Upon graduation he settled in Lexington, Kentucky, but when competition proved too great, he established his practice at Hopkinsville, Kentucky. An arena of adventure opened up to him here, for the science of medicine in the early nineteenth century welcomed pioneers who charted new paths, opened up new and enchanting regions of speculation, and wrestled with the obstacles and difficulties associated with peculiarly local diseases. "From agues, fevers, soremouth, tic-doloreux . . . from inundations, plagues, almost from pestilence & famine," the westerners turned to the medical profession for sustenance and aid. "There never was such a time of sickness—The *whole* country is ague-struck & shivering with disease—Every house you enter in riding through this part of the country contains some sick, every man you meet has a countenance blanched with distemperment." It was cholera which challenged medical science. John Cleves Short, when visiting Cincinnati in 1832, following the cholera epidemic, never saw "the streets so desolate . . . . Everybody you meet looks as if he had been struck—or the profusion of crape and the countenance of sorrow, indicates that some one near and dear has fallen." To Dr. Short it was particularly disturbing to see people from all walks of life stricken by the plague, and "by no means from the ranks which more commonly supply its victims, but from the most respectable, sober, and useful citizens."

As a general practitioner, Dr. Charles Wilkins Short made his contribution to the medical profession, but as a teacher of medicine, he moulded and shaped the lives of young men who came under his influence. He admonished them to be "at all times ready to obey the summons of the sick, whether it call you to the seat of opulence and ease, or to the hovel of misery and wretchedness. Be ever willing to pour the fruit of your earnings among the rich, into the lap

of poverty—to sooth the widow's sorrow, to dry the orphan's tear. Scorn as you would the most polluting stain, abhor as you would the very forfeit of your honour, that mean and dastardly disposition which would induce you to supplant a professional brother, by insiduous distraction, or by officiously interfering in his business. Despise as contemptible and unworthy of your acceptance, that popular favour which is bought by sectarian influence or political partyism . . . ."

It was not yet a scientific age, in so far as the doctors of the period were concerned, but it may be said that the medical pioneers of the Ohio Valley progressed almost as rapidly in a sectional sense as the nation at large. To know how they combated disease on the western frontier is simply another aspect of the history of the region which can not be neglected in tracing its cultural growth. To praise or condemn is not the historian's task, but to reflect the many attempts made by the early doctors to conquer disease and to create a culture which would enable men to have "freedom from fear" of the unknown pestilences which move furtively about him.

The Shorts, through several generations, worked off the restless spirit of the pioneer in travel. They resorted to the clumsy stage-coach, the puffing steamboat, and later the volant mode of transportation by rail. Their tours furrowed into the South, Northwest, and East, all for some particular purpose: to visit at one another's houses, pursue further education at distant cities, explore new regions for botanical specimens, improve their health, investigate other sections for possible investment, and to broaden their vision of national life. How much effect their travels had upon their contemporaries can not be determined, but it is not too presumptuous to accord them an honorable place in the creation of a national outlook and the dissemination of a culture which was not entirely local in color.

As weavers of ante-bellum tapestries, the Short family was scarcely less interested in the servile fabric of nineteenth

century society. With the bright hues of education, literature, science, and art were interwoven the more somber colors of slavery. To Dr. Charles Wilkins Short slavery existed because there were no other means by which the Negro could survive: "free negroes in this country have a much harder task imposed upon them to support themselves, than when in the possession of humane owners; and many of them, unable to make their living by honest means, are compelled to resort to theft; or to be a tax upon the white population and a sore annoyance to them."

Within the Short family, the fidelity of the slaves to their master testifies to the humane and sane treatment which they received. On one occasion, when Dr. Short took one of his slaves, Charles, to visit in Ohio, where he was subjected to "all the persuasions and influences of free blacks and white abolitionists," Dr. Short found Charles "anxiously awaiting" his arrival and ready to return to Louisville.

Foremost among the attempts of the Shorts to deal with the problem of slavery was the effort to liberate their slaves and send them to Liberia under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. Only one slave, Charles Gist, availed himself of this opportunity to be clothed and transported to Africa by the generosity of William Short. One year later Gist wrote of his new home and the attempts he was making to improve himself "for usefulness in our rising Republic." Through the many gifts of money sent by William Short and Dr. Short, the former Bluegrass slave was "exempted . . . from many of the hardships that others have had to undergo in this country."

With the year 1849 the last slave in Dr. Short's home, "Hayfield," passed on to his "Green Pastures." Old Joe was buried by the side of his sister Ursula in a Methodist church yard near Louisville. Over the graves of these two faithful slaves was placed a tablet with this inscription: "To the memory of Joseph and Ursula—Brother and Sister—Two

faithful coloured Servants, originally from Virginia, who died at an advanced age, and were buried here in 1849."

In religion the Shorts found their solace from suffering. Their letters devote much space to the bliss of Heaven where man would forever be released from the burden of pain. To Dr. Charles Wilkins Short the problem of pain and sickness in this world was a certain indication of the exemption of the human race from suffering in the world to come. A remedy was also sought for the presence of evil. In consultation and communication with the ministers of the day, the Shorts were offered a solution to the problem which faced them by embracing "an Earnest living religious faith," becoming "followers of Christ," and placing a "personal faith in the Redeemer's blood."

With the coming of the Civil War the more active members of the Short family, treated in this study, passed on to their reward. But their lives complete a rounded picture of a family which moved into the Ohio Valley in 1790, developed various phases of social and intellectual attainments, and cultivated refinements and specializations which made for cultural progress.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The largest body of Short manuscripts now rests in the Library of Congress. It is a collection of personal papers of the Short, Harrison, Symmes, and allied families, numbering approximately 13,000 pieces. The manuscripts cover a wide range of social history, over many decades, principally concerning the Ohio Valley. Here also are the William Short Papers of fifty-two volumes.

One other large collection of letters to and from members of the Short family is in the archives of the Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky. In other libraries and private collections over the country are to be found scattered papers relating to the family: Charles Wilkins Short to John Vaughan and William Short to Benjamin Franklin (American Philosophical Society); Peyton Short to James Wilkinson (Chicago Historical Society); Charles Wilkins Short to Mary Henry Churchill and various botanists to Dr. Short (private collection of Alexander F. Courtenay, Louisville); Peyton Short to Col. Isaac Shelby (Durrett Collection, University of Chicago); Dr. Short to Dr. Asa Gray (Gray Herbarium, Harvard University); Dr. Short to Dr. George Engelmann (Missouri Botanical Garden); Dr. Short to John Torrey (New York Botanical Garden); and letters of various botanists to Dr. Short (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina). Dr. Short's diaries of his activities in Philadelphia are in a private collection of Mrs. Jane Courtenay Tyler, Haynes City, Florida. Miscellaneous Short letters are found in the private collection of Ludie J. Kinkead of Louisville, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the New York Public Library, the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Transylvania College, and the College of William and Mary.

VITA

Irving Frederick Ahlquist was born in Rockford, Illinois, on February 28, 1919. After receiving his elementary and secondary education in the Rockford public schools, he entered Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, graduating with honors in 1940. The following year he received the master of arts degree from the University of Illinois. During the school year 1941-1942 he was granted a fellowship to pursue work on his doctorate. In September, 1942, he entered the Army of the United States, receiving his discharge as a Captain in July, 1946. For the school year 1946-1947 he was granted a graduate fellowship to finish his doctoral work which had been interrupted by the war. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Gamma Mu.